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EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

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If a Nobel winning economist told you that he had come up with an idea to decrease our budget deficit and strengthen our economy, would you listen? If that same idea had also been proven to decrease crime, reduce poverty, and cut juvenile delinquency rates, would you want to hear more? What if that idea could impact the academic success, personal character, and the overall direction of the lives of a future generation?

Is there really one thing we could do that would have that kind of impact on our community, our state, and our country? Some may think it's impossible, but others already know what economist James J. Heckman announced last month. His idea to help our country...create and invest in high-quality early childhood programs.

We know that the early years are important to a child's development. In fact, a whopping 90 percent of a child's brain development takes place in the first five years. We call them the "formative years" for a reason.

These years make all the difference. The events a child experiences; the people in his life; the support he receives - whether these things are positive or negative - will influence the rest of his life. What an opportunity we have and what a responsibility we bear.

At the YMCA, our focus is on youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility. There is no other area where we can have such an impact on all three of these issues than early childhood education. We take that seriously.

Youth development starts with a high-quality early childhood program. A top-notch program gives children a safe and nurturing environment in which to grow. It ensures that dedicated and knowledgeable adults provide the guidance and support that each child needs. A developmentally appropriate program offers activities that are stimulating and encourages children to engage in their own learning. This type of program is able to meet each child at his or her own developmental level and accommodates all types of learners.

Healthy living is an integral part of an early childhood program. Children are learning good habits, self-help skills, and respect for themselves and others. They are developing a healthy spirit, mind, and body and these are things that can stay with them for a lifetime.

Social responsibility is another driving force for a quality early childhood program. We have a responsibility to the children to give them every advantage possible and to make the most of these windows of opportunity. We also have a responsibility to our society to grow strong kids.

We know the effects a high quality early childhood education program can have on society. The research has shown that at-risk children who attend high-quality early education programs are less likely to commit crimes as adults and more likely to complete high school. The economist, Heckman, calculates that high quality programs for children birth to age five have a higher per-dollar return for society than K-12 schooling and later job training. An analysis by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Michigan found that, in the long run, quality early education saves as much as \$16 for every dollar invested.

At the Grand Traverse Bay YMCA, we're making an investment in the youth of our community. We're providing a high quality values-based education program for children from birth through preschool at our Y Early Childhood Center. We're partnering with parents to make a difference in the lives of young children and we believe that the impact on those lives will be great.

If you'd like to learn more about the Y Early Childhood Center or how you can help us make a difference in the lives of the children in our community, call our Director, Dagny Monette, at 421-3568.